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ABSTRACT

The thesis underlying this paper is that maltreatment of children is fundamentally a socio-cultural problem, rather than a personal one. The use of an ecological model of human development is advocated to provide insight into the dynamics of child maltreatment, with emphasis on organism-environment interaction, social policy and second-order effects. Hypotheses basic to a program of research on primary and secondary prevention are outlined. Two actual projects within such a program are described. The goal of the first is to develop a multivariate model of the correlates of child maltreatment. The model is to be used to screen neighborhoods for intervention on the basis of the discrepancy between actual and predicted incidence. The second project uses a face-to-face interview procedure to explore the "family biographies" of three contrasting groups: those families reported to Child Protective Services for suspected child maltreatment; those known to be experiencing social stress but known to provide excellent child care; and those who are identified as part of the social network of the former two groups. A preliminary clinical application being considered involves using the interview to locate the "natural reinforcers" in the family's environment. It is hoped that increasing the adequacy of feedback, modeling and reinforcement for good child care through the use of social networks will provide an effective complement to conventional family intervention. (Author/BF)

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The Human Ecology of Child Maltreatment

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The thesis underlying this paper is that the maltreatment of children is fundamentally a cultural problem. We as a culture are prone to see the roots and solutions of social problems in individualistic terms.

Child maltreatment has thus been understood as a problem of psychologically defective individuals. Our characteristic responses reflect this--psychotherapy, counselling, incarceration, etc. Moreover, our research also reflects this individualistic bias with its emphasis on the "personality of abusive parents," the "special child" and the "inadequate mothering-imprint."

While individual differences no doubt contribute to the maltreatment of children and may even be the sufficient conditions in some cases, this individualist perspective is inadequate to the task of both understanding and prevention.

The ecological model of human development is particularly useful in this area because it helps us overcome the analytic limitations imposed upon us by our individualistic culture.

The ecological model of human development thus provides insight into the dynamics of child maltreatment, particularly child abuse.¹ Three key areas can be illuminated through application of the ecological model. First, the developmental course of child maltreatment can be best understood by recognizing that human development proceeds through the mutual adaptation of organism and environment. Second, the creation and evaluation of intervention efforts can be more effectively handled by recognizing that social policy directly shapes the context in which human development occurs. There is no such thing as "pure, context-free development." Third, the proper "location"

¹ Many of the presumed "facts" established by early, clinically-oriented psychiatric studies have been called into question by subsequent researchers. Even the "intergenerational transmission" proposition (i.e., that abusive parents were themselves abused as children) is being called into question (Friedman, 1976; Jayaratne, 1977). Though this proposition is generally accepted as "fact" (e.g., Spinetta and Rigler, 1972; NCCAN, 1975; Parke and Collmer, 1975) there is reason to doubt its validity as a causal hypothesis.

to search for the "causes" of child maltreatment can be suggested by the concept of "second order effects"² --i.e., that agents outside the victim-perpetrator dyad have a significant, even controlling impact on the dynamics of maltreatment (Justice and Justice, 1976).

Although several researchers have investigated the social conditions of child maltreatment* little has been done to develop an empirically validated multivariate model. The ecological model demands such an approach by its very nature (i.e., because of the central roles played by organism-environment interaction, social policy and second-order effects). From this perspective several hypotheses have emerged concerning the origins of child maltreatment.³ These hypotheses can provide the foundation for a program of research on both primary and secondary prevention.

Hypothesis 1: There are two necessary conditions for child maltreatment to occur.⁴ The first condition pertains to the "ideological system," and concerns the social definition of children in relation to parents. It involves the cultural support for violence against children and is two-fold. It may be stated thus:

For child maltreatment to occur it is necessary that a) children be defined as the property of their parents in contrast to being citizens for whom parents merely serve in the role of guardians (necessary conditions for both abuse and neglect); and, b) the use of physical force against children be sanctioned by law and custom (necessary for abuse). This condition is amply met throughout American society (Gil, 1970; cf., Parke and Collmer, 1975; Radbill, 1974; Zigler, 1976).

The second necessary condition pertains to the relationship of family to social environment, and may be stated thus:

* (cf., Friedman, 1976; Gelles, 1973; Gil, 1970; Parke and Collmer, 1975; Polansky, 1976; Zigler, 1976)

² The essential concepts and principles constituting the ecological model of human development have been developed elsewhere (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Garbarino and Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1977).

³ These hypotheses are developed in two papers by the author, "The Price of Privacy" and "The Human Ecology of Child Abuse and Neglect: A Conceptual Model for Research" cited in the references.

⁴ The distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions is clearly expressed in the following terms (Bronfenbrenner and Mahoney, 1975): "Necessary means that the effect cannot occur except under the specified conditions . . . a sufficient condition is one that produces a given effect . . . within a given set of boundary conditions, x is a sufficient condition if a change in x produces a change in y." (pp. 6-7)

For child maltreatment to occur, it is necessary that the parent-child relationship be isolated from potent "support systems" (Bronfenbrenner, 1975; Caplan, 1975, 1976). Support systems provide feedback to parents on their behavior and the behavior of children. They also provide important resources for coping with stress and demands from within the family (i.e., in the characteristics of the parents and children) and from the family's relationships with the outside world (e.g., the world of work). Such support systems--particularly family social networks--mediate adjustment problems which produce pathogenic stresses (Holmes and Rahe, 1967; Paykel, 1976; Weissman and Paykel, 1974). If it is to be an enduring pattern of behavior, child maltreatment--particularly abuse--requires social isolation (Garbarino, 1977).

Our individualistic ethos permits and even encourages the social isolation necessary for child maltreatment. The value we attach to privacy and our belief in the individual as responsible for both failure and success blinds us to the overwhelming importance of social support systems--particularly social networks. Our society is thus fertile ground for child abuse and neglect.

Since human development is the product of the ongoing mutual adaptation of organism and environment it follows that while in principle virtually anyone is capable of becoming involved in child maltreatment, some people are more susceptible than others, some are particularly prone to it, and some (a small percentage) are doomed to it unless their behavior is powerfully regulated and counter trends supported.

Some environments, on the other hand, will not tolerate the maltreatment of children, some permit it, others encourage it and some virtually demand it. Despicable as this sounds, historical and cross-cultural studies confirm the validity of this conclusion. This analysis leads to three other hypotheses.

Hypothesis 2: There are multiple sufficient conditions for child maltreatment. Principally, however, these sufficient conditions are of two classes: a) the psychopathology of parents (accounting for a relatively small proportion of the cases, approximately 10%); and, b) incompetence in the role of caregiver. The role of caregiver is defined by the situations in which it is performed. Incompetence in that role derives from a multitude of factors including level of social stress, demand characteristics of the child and prior training for the role.

Hypothesis 3: Child maltreatment is a manifestation of "lives out of control." Thus it is a derivative of family life course development. As part of the "family biography" it is linked to "asynchrony" in major events--marriage, entrance into and exit from the labor market, pregnancy, early attachment "bonding," etc. Child maltreatment is a problem of ineffective life management, with abuse being an "active" response to a life out of control while neglect is a "passive" response (Friedman, 1976; Polansky, 1976).⁵

⁵ A wide range of research findings can be understood from this perspective, including the frequently noted behavioral inconsistency of maltreating parents.

Hypothesis 4: A complete understanding of child maltreatment requires awareness of community context as defined by socioeconomic, demographic, attitudinal and policy factors. The family dynamics of maltreatment occur within the context defined by neighborhood characteristics and the behavior of institutions. Thus, the official and unofficial means which are applied to the task of "monitoring" and "serving" families are an important force in defining and shaping the context in which maltreatment takes place. Neighborhood-oriented epidemiological study is essential.

These four hypotheses provide the underlying rationale for a research program on the human ecology of child maltreatment.* This program has two major components at present.

I. Screening Neighborhoods for Intervention

In this series of studies the goal is to develop a multivariate model of the correlates of child maltreatment. This multivariate model can then be used to "screen" neighborhoods for intervention on the basis of the discrepancy between actual and predicted incidence. This program began with an analysis of socioeconomic, demographic and ecological correlates across the counties of a single State (Garbarino, 1976). It was then expanded to a comparison of counties from two ecologically contrasting States (Garbarino and Crouter, in press). Currently the analysis focuses on sub-areas and census tracts within a single county including urban and suburban areas (Garbarino, Crouter and Sherman, in press).

The initial results of this project are encouraging. In the study of 20 sub-areas within Douglas County, Nebraska, using a multivariate model incorporating socioeconomic, demographic and attitudinal factors⁶ a large proportion of the variance in the reported rates of child maltreatment (per 1000 families)⁷ was accounted for: 82% of the variance in overall reported maltreatment, 79% of the variance in reported abuse, and 84% of the variance in reported neglect. More importantly, for the purposes of the project,

* The development of this research program is supported by the Boys Town Center for the Study of Youth Development. Preliminary results and research designs are presented in papers cited in the references.

⁶ U.S. Census data plus special survey data collected by the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Center for Applied Urban Research.

⁷ The problematic socioeconomic bias in official reports is recognized in the research. Substantial effects are documented, however, after statistically controlling for the underrepresentation of affluent families. Thus demographic and attitudinal factors are significant (and in some cases powerful) influences after removing socioeconomic factors. It should be noted, however, that the socioeconomic effect is not believed to be entirely artifactual, i.e., that a substantive effect does exist.

comparing the actual and predicted rates has allowed identification of specific areas for further intensive study. Areas with actual rates substantially higher than predicted and with actual rates substantially lower than predicted have been identified. This screening process is being applied to census tracts as

--Figure 1--

well. Preliminary results parallel the findings for sub-areas, although the correlational relationships are somewhat attenuated due in part to the greater lability of the maltreatment rates for the smaller units (93 census tracts vs. 20 sub-areas). The utility of the screening process in identifying contrasting settings for family- and neighborhood-level analyses is demonstrated, however.

In addition to studying the overall rates of child maltreatment, an effort is being made to examine the interaction of reporting source with a) severity and type of maltreatment; b) prognosis for secondary prevention; c) incidence and d) contextual factors. These analyses are designed to test the hypothesis that the "closer" the source of the report to the natural and enduring social networks of families, the more effective are the support systems serving the interests of children.

II. Assessing Families

The second project attempts to document the "family biographies" of families in contrasting social contexts and which exhibit contrasting patterns of child care. This study builds on the premise that at least 25% of the population is "psychologically prone" to acting in an abusive manner due to their experiences, attitudes and values regarding child-rearing (Garbarino, in press). Since the mutual adaptation of organism and environment is a central concept in the ecological model of human development, establishing the linkage between families and contexts is vital.

The project relies upon a face-to-face interview procedure which addresses the following topics:

- a. family and household composition and marital history
- b. relation to and evaluation of neighborhood
- c. involvement in church
- d. child care arrangements
- e. participation in the world of work and its relation to family life
- f. finances
- g. health and health care
- h. awareness and use of family and social services in the community
- i. perception of the child
- j. television
- k. child care information and advice
- l. support and stress from friends and neighbors
- m. evaluation of self-as-parent and of respondent's own parents
- n. relationships with kin
- o. social networks of parents and family
- p. participation in groups (clubs, etc.)

- q. events requiring social and personal readjustment⁸
- r. labor force and residential history

This interview is being used to explore the biographies of three contrasting groups of families: those reported to Child Protective Services for suspected child maltreatment, those known to be experiencing social stress (e.g., low income, health problems, etc.) but who are known to provide excellent child care, and those who are named as part of the social networks of the aforementioned two groups. In all cases the interviewer is "blind" to the status of the family insofar as is possible.

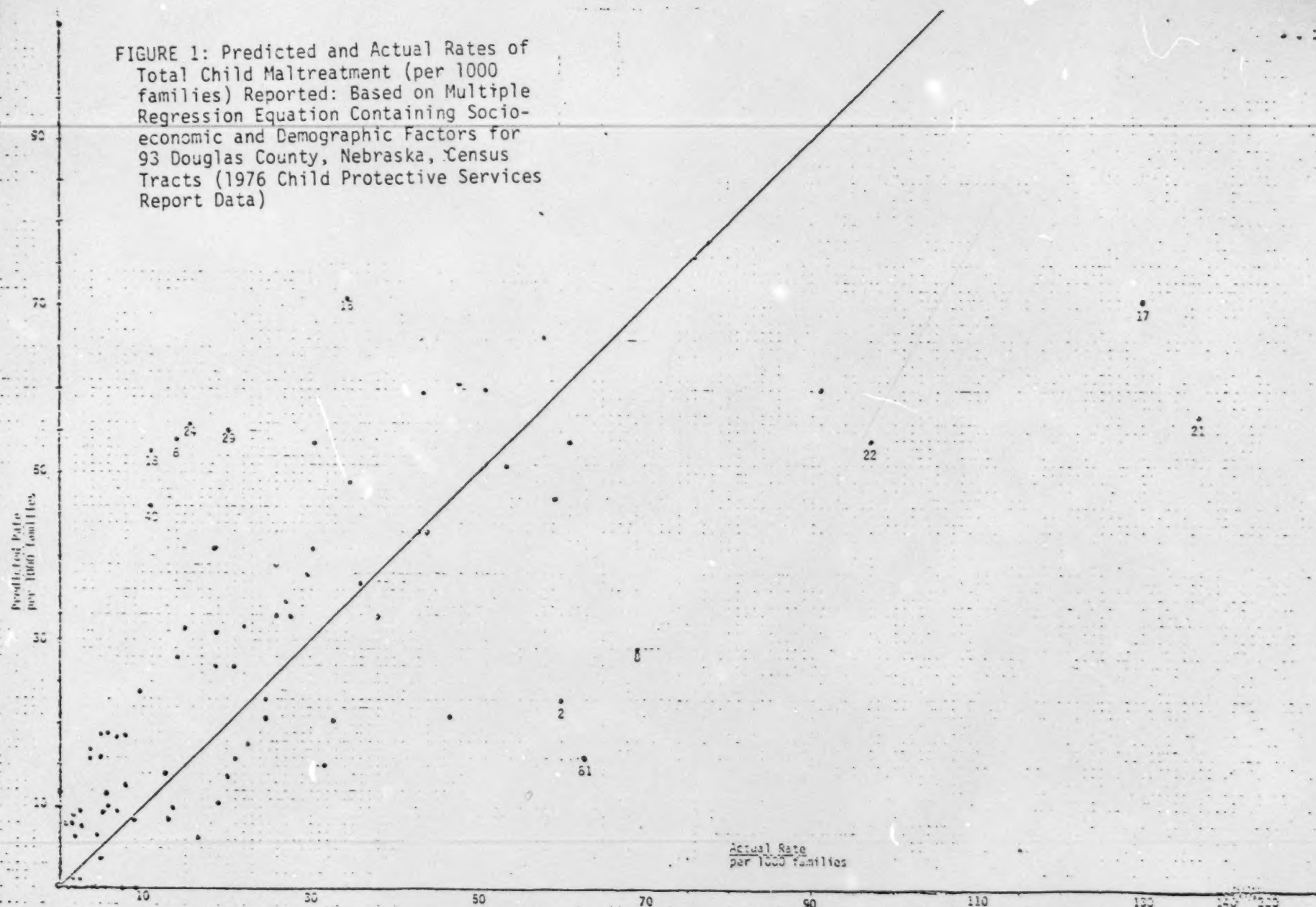
Thus, the "World of Abnormal Rearing" (as it is called in the clinical work of Helfer and Kempe) may be explored systematically in contrast to the world of competent child rearing. Moreover, the utility of the interview as an instrument for screening families for intervention will be investigated.

The preliminary clinical application currently being considered involves using the interview to locate the "natural reinforcers" in the family's environment. These resources may be incorporated into a multi-phasic treatment approach to secondary prevention. By identifying resources which can be used to support enduring behavioral change, the coping ability of the parents may be enhanced. Increasing the adequacy of feedback, modelling and reinforcement for good child care through the use of social networks will hopefully provide an effective complement to conventional family intervention. Thus clinical application will emerge from the research on family stresses and supports in which "ecological experiments" can play a major role.

Research derives its human legitimacy in large part from its contribution to policy and practice. Child maltreatment is an excellent indicator of the quality of life for families. As long as we as a society are willing to permit out individualistic culture to stand in the way of providing powerful support systems, our children and their parents will continue to be at the mercy of hostile psychosocial, socioeconomic and demographic forces. Until we are willing to defuse those forces by removing the necessary condition of social isolation, untold thousands of children will continue to bear the ugly burden of abuse and neglect.

⁸ Holmes-Rahe Social Readjustment Scale (Holmes and Rahe, 1967).

FIGURE 1: Predicted and Actual Rates of Total Child Maltreatment (per 1000 families) Reported: Based on Multiple Regression Equation Containing Socio-economic and Demographic Factors for 93 Douglas County, Nebraska, Census Tracts (1976 Child Protective Services Report Data)



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